

Martin Berger

Introduction

In his 1967 autobiography, artist and collector William Spratling noted that “if it were not for the receptive or responsible minds of collectors, there would be no museums in the world today. The ability to appreciate and collect begins with the individual and not with the state nor with the masses”.¹ While Spratling’s statement might be borne out of his trademark self-confidence and exuberant style, his assertion is not entirely beside the truth. As the contributions to this issue show, individuals such as collectors, dealers, and middle (wo)men played an important role in shaping museum collections as well as the knowledge contained in them and created around them. They did so not only by forming collections, but also by creating taste and providing local knowledge that was essential for professional archaeologists in locating field sites. This way, these actors not only assembled collections that eventually ended up in museums, but more broadly shaped valuations for certain types of material and, by providing access to both field sites and objects, contributed to the academic knowledge that we have of precolonial Latin American (material) cultures today.

This issue of JAMS examines the influence that art market actors (specifically dealers and collectors) had on the formation of collections in museums in Europe and the United States. Following on earlier issues of JAMS that focused on Africa (Vol. 4, 1) and East Asia (Vol. 2, 3 and Vol. 4, 2), this issue turns towards Latin America, looking primarily at archaeological collections but also briefly examining the lively trade in and market for ethnographic items that existed in the twentieth century. As Felicity Bodenstein has argued in the context of the trade in African ethnographic material “the central question is the role of commercial transactions in the establishment of systematic collecting practice”.² This issue addresses the same central question in the Latin American context.

1 William Spratling, *File on Spratling: An Autobiography* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company), 152.

2 Felicity Bodenstein. Africa: Trade, Traffic, Collections, in *Journal for Art Market Studies*, vol 4, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.23690/jams.v4i1.119>.

An important difference between these two parts of the globe is that virtually all Latin American countries had achieved independence by 1821, predating the foundation of most specialized ethnographic collections in Europe. As a result the colonial contexts in which Latin American collections were amassed in the nineteenth century were different from those in Africa. Similarly, large looting events such as the sacking of the Yuanmingyuan or the looting of the winter palace in Beijing (see JAMS Vol. 2,3 and 4,2³) did not take place in Latin America after the region's independence from Spain and Portugal – though of course similar events happened centuries earlier when Europeans first arrived on the continent in the early sixteenth century.

This is not to say that the formal political independence of Latin American countries ended all forms of internal colonial systems and marginalization of Indigenous (and other) communities, some of which continue to exist until today. However, it does mean that the kinds of actors involved in amassing these collections differ, at least to an extent, from those discussed in earlier issues of JAMS focusing on Africa and East Asia. In the present issue, colonial servants are notably absent, as are army officers, marines, colonial administrators, and other actors related to the colonial endeavor or the military. This absence is not only due to the different political history of the region, but especially to the fact that all articles in this issue focus on the twentieth century, when a market for Latin American archaeological pieces came into being that led to the large-scale displacement of this kind of material.

As noted by Susanne Meyer-Abich in the editorial introduction to this issue, in creating this market, “the secret was decontextualization – offering objects with strong visual credentials which could be regarded as artworks irrespective of their original purpose”. This decontextualization and aestheticization of archaeological objects led to the collecting of Latin American archaeological material *as art*. The broader and structural process of “artification” of Latin American archaeological material has been amply explored elsewhere.⁴ Similarly, the commercial and ethical sides of this newly formed market – and particularly its impact on archaeological sites – have been thoroughly studied before.⁵ In this issue, the focus lies more broadly on how market-based actors shaped taste and contributed to archaeological knowledge, and the role these same actors played in

3 See also Louise Tythacott, *The Lives of Chinese Objects – Buddhism, imperialism and display* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011).

4 E.g. Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (NY: Abrams, 2000). Megan O'Neill and Mary E. Miller, An Artistic Discovery of America: Exhibiting and Collecting Mexican Pre-Hispanic Art in Los Angeles from 1940 to the 1960s, in *Found in Translation: Design in California and Mexico, 1915-1985*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Los Angeles: LACMA and Pre-setel, 2017), 162-167. Mark Nelson, William Sherman, Ellen Hoobler, *Hollywood Arensberg – Avant-Garde Collecting in Midcentury L.A.* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2020).

5 E.g. Clemency Coggins, Illicit Traffic of Pre-Columbian Antiquities, in *Art journal* 29, no. 1 (1969): 94–114; Cara Tremain and Donna Yates, eds., *The Market for Mesoamerica: Reflections on the Sale of Pre-Columbian Antiquities* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019); Walter Alva, The Destruction, Looting and Traffic of the Archaeological Heritage of Peru, in Neil Brodie, Jennifer Doole, and Colin Renfrew, eds., *Trade in Illicit Antiquities: the Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage* (Cambridge: MacDonald Institute, 2001), 89–96.

creating museum collections. Of course this process and this market can be approached from many different angles. In this issue, some venture into this world by way of focusing on particular dealers (Orsini, Antonini and Villa; Miller and O'Neill; Caromano and Françoço). Others take museum collections as their starting point (König, Berger), or look at a particular type of material or archaeological culture (Phillips Quintanilla and Turner). In all of these cases, what lies at the center is the transformation of ancestral Indigenous Latin American material into something different. This different thing does not necessarily have to be a work of art, but can also be an object of scholarly study, a representative "sample" of a particular culture, or – more broadly – a commodity or an investment.

At the heart of this issue is an exploration of the way in which academic research, the market, museum collections, and curators are intertwined, and how all of these together shaped the archaeological knowledge of and research in the region. Phillips Quintanilla and Turner's contribution to this issue is particularly illustrative of this process, as they show how "modern conceptions of the ancient cultures that populated Central Veracruz during the Classic period have been shaped in no small part by looting and demands of the art market".⁶ As Phillips Quintanilla and Turner argue in their contribution to this volume, "the international art market in [...] Latin American antiquities has shaped the currently accepted canon of pre-Hispanic art to a degree that remains underrecognized". Part of this lack of recognition is undoubtedly due to the fact that the worlds of academics and curators, on the one hand, and that of art dealers, on the other, have grown apart, especially since the introduction of the UNESCO 1970 Convention.⁷ Today, most museums have ceased to acquire this material from the art market and antiquities dealers are generally not invited into the museum. This situation was markedly different in the mid-twentieth century when academics, curators, and commercial actors were in regular contact. Curators often relied on the expertise and advice of art dealers in selecting which pieces to acquire, while dealers, vice versa, relied on particular scholarly actors to authenticate their wares. König's and Berger's contributions to this issue outline the extent to which European museums were largely dependent on art dealers in creating their collections, especially for acquiring high-quality material that was not otherwise available to them.

Miller and O'Neill's contribution to this issue make this connection between dealers and museums from "the other side" by showing how the Stendahl Art Galleries created a taste for this material (as well as a feeling of urgency to collect among both private individuals and museum curators) by placing exhibitions in museums, thereby shaping ideas of what constituted important "pre-Columbian art". In similar fashion, Caromano and Françoço's work, as well as Orsini, Antonini, and Villa's contribution, show how single individuals could be such prolific dealers that their actions helped shape understandings

6 Phillips Quintanilla and Turner, this issue, page 18.

7 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>.

of different cultures and regions in ethnographic museums in Europe and North America.

Ultimately, then, the most relevant question may not be how the market for pre-Columbian art came into being. Rather, it seems essential to focus on how the different actors active in this market together created not just a sense of taste, but different definitions of what constitutes value within this particular Art World, in the process creating a canon of what constitutes “acceptable pre-Columbian art”.⁸ Taking this broader and more inclusive view of our disciplinary history shows that our current understanding of “pre-Columbian Art” was not born solely in academic (collecting) institutions, but in the dynamic between universities, museums, private collectors, and dealers.

Finally, this issue of JAMS is the outcome of a symposium organized in Leiden in June of 2022.⁹ Even though, for a range of reasons, not all papers presented at that workshop could be included in this publication, I would like to acknowledge here the valuable contributions presented in Leiden by Léa Saint-Raymond, Donna Yates, Alexander Brust, Alice Lopes Fabris, Manuel May Castillo, Maria Julia Fernandes Vicentín, María José Jarín, Sophie Brockmann, Leandro Matthews Cascon, Nelson Sanjad, and Matheus Camilo Coelho. Please keep an eye out for their excellent work in other publication venues.

8 See also Rosemary Joyce, Making Markets for Mesoamerican Antiquities, in Cara Tremain and Donna Yates, eds., *The Market for Mesoamerica: Reflections on the Sale of Pre-Columbian Antiquities* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), 1-15.

9 This workshop was organized in preparation for the “Between Canon and Coincidence” project, a ERC Starting Grant-funded project, that will kick off at Leiden University in January of 2024. For more information see <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2023/09/archaeologist-martin-berger-explores-lat-in-american-collections-with-an-erc-grant>.